



The Saudi experiment with career guidance

Item type	Book chapter
Authors	Hooley, Tristram
Citation	Hooley, T. (2017). The Saudi experiment with career guidance. In Sultana, R. Career Guidance and Livelihood Planning Across the Mediterranean. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp.283-300.
Publisher	Sense Publishing
Downloaded	13-Jan-2019 02:50:14
Link to item	http://hdl.handle.net/10545/621563

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18. THE SAUDI EXPERIMENT WITH CAREER GUIDANCE

Borrowing Policy and Managing the Clash of Context and Theory

ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia has recently embarked on an ambitious experiment with career guidance. The country has identified that career guidance offers a range of potential cultural, educational and economic benefits. These include supporting the Saudisation of the workforce, the development of the vocational education system and the engagement of the Saudi 'youth bulge' in the labour market and wider society. However, the country has a weak tradition of career guidance and a need to develop new policies and systems rapidly. The Saudi Ministry of Labour has driven the development of the country's new career guidance system and has sought to learn from global best practice. However, Saudi Arabia offers a very different context from those where career guidance has flourished. Particularly distinctive features of Saudi society include its limited civil society, the central role that religion plays, the place of women, the role of oil within the economy and the high level of migrant workers in the labour market. Taken together these issues offer challenges of culture, theory, policy and practice. Negotiating these challenges and building an organic body of theory and practice will be critical to the success or otherwise of the Saudi experiment with career guidance.

INTRODUCTION

Career guidance is an international phenomenon found in a wide range of countries with different political and cultural traditions. Watts (2014a) records that formal reviews of career guidance systems have been conducted in 55 countries. However, its spread across the globe raises issues as career guidance is neither culturally nor ideologically neutral and has a strong foundation in Western individualism.

The process of policy borrowing and lending is a controversial one. As Sadler (1900) noted educational policy makers ignore context at their peril. Without attention to context the flourishing innovations from one country may simply wither when transplanted to foreign soils. Furthermore, introducing foreign approaches, particularly when they have come from the USA and Europe, raise concerns about cultural imperialism. Education is an intensely ideological activity. It defines what

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is worth knowing and doing in a society and actively seeks to inculcate this in the next generation.

Concerns about cultural imperialism do not tell the whole story. As Watts (2015) has pointed out career guidance can take a range of ideological stances. It is also highly mutable and can be rethought and reinvented for different contexts.

The attempt to establish a career guidance system in Saudi Arabia provides us with an interesting case study of policy borrowing. Can a Western innovation such as career guidance be successfully transferred into the different culture of Saudi Arabia? What happens to it during this process of policy borrowing? And how does career guidance interact with the existing politics, culture and educational system of its new home?

I have visited Saudi Arabia twice as a consultant and trainer in 2014 and 2015. After returning on each occasion I wrote a detailed reflection on my experience based on my field notes (labelled as *reflection one* and *reflection two*). I have also undertaken some work remotely with Saudi organisations. This direct experience forms the basis of this chapter but I have sought to supplement my own experience with literature and with a series of structured reflections gathered from eight non-Saudi informants involved in the development of career guidance in Saudi Arabia. My informants are either career guidance professionals working in Saudi Arabia or consultants involved in the development of the career guidance system (where their contributions are directly cited they are labelled as *Guidance professional one – four* and *Consultant one – four*).¹

UNDERSTANDING SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula. It is the only country that has both a Red Sea and a Persian Gulf border. Between the coastal areas most of the country consists of arid and desert regions. It is the birthplace of Islam and the home of the two holiest places in the Islam, the mosques in Mecca and Medina. The international religious importance of Saudi Arabia works in concert with its economic power (fuelled by the country's natural reserves) and its political power as the key player in a region of global strategic significance.

The country was united in 1932 by Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, whose family still rules the country. The House of Saud was central to the creation of the current Saudi national identity and continues to actively build this identity through initiatives such as the launch of the Saudi national museum and the development of the subject of national education in the school curriculum (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix, 2015; Lacey, 2009).

The State and Civil Society

The country is a monarchy, with strong social hierarchies and limited civic institutions (Lacey, 2009). Most of the senior roles in government are held either

by members of the royal family or their close associates. The ties of blood and patronage mean that there are limited opportunities to influence policy for those without connections to this ruling élite. The power of the monarch and the ruling élite is further strengthened by the fact that members of the royal family control two of the three international pan-Arab newspapers and have significant influence over some of the main online news sources and the satellite television network.

Where social and political movements do originate outside of the élite, the main channel that exists for these movements is through religious organisations (Gregory Cause, 2015). Indeed, the religious authorities (*ulama*) are the main alternative source of power to the government, although in practice the policy and aims of the *ulama* and the government are usually in close alignment. This partnership between secular and religious authorities underpins much of government of Saudi Arabia and is often used to account for its political stability.

This is not to suggest that there are no political differences within Saudi Arabia. Saudis discuss politics openly and there are clear and observable differences between ‘conservatives’ and ‘modernisers’. These differences are at once political (how should Saudi Arabia be run) and cultural (how should we live together and conduct our lives). However, these different ‘parties’ have very limited institutions through which their contrasting ideas about their country can be advocated.

The limited civil society raises considerable problems for those who are interested in achieving social or policy change. With particular reference to the project of developing a career guidance system, the lack of institutions like teachers’ unions, federations of school principals, inspection services or quality improvement agencies offers major challenges.

The Role of Religion

Religion is critical to an understanding of Saudi Arabia. Islam is strongly embedded in the country’s politics and culture with the majority (there is also a minority Shia population) adhering to a literalist interpretation of the religion which is often referred to as Wahhabism or Salafism (Commins, 2015; Lacey, 2009). Wahhabism is named after the eighteenth century Islamic reformer Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab but emerged in its modern form as the state religion of Saudi Arabia under Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud.

Religion is a visible part of Saudi day-to-day life and structures the lives of Saudis around various forms of worship. One of the guidance professionals that I spoke to summed this up, noting:

Features most important [to Saudis] appear to be the Arabic language, Islam and the numerous places of worship, which are present at the local level... The call to prayer can be heard from almost anywhere. Shops close during the prayer times (even in many of the shopping centres). (Guidance professional four)

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Religion is also key to political and professional discourse with Saudis frequently referring to their religion as part of their discussion of the rationale for particular actions. Islam is incontestable; however there are clearly a wide range of interpretations as to how the religion should be understood and enacted in the context of modern Saudi Arabia. Saudis who I spoke to highlighted two main kinds of legitimate contestation (*Reflection two*). Firstly, I was informed by many Saudis that other Muslims, notably radicals, had misread and misinterpreted the Qur'an. The importance of interpretation both opens up space for debate and elevates the status of Qur'anic scholars whose pronouncements become key aspects of the political debate. Secondly, many Saudis highlighted the distinction between religion and Saudi culture. For example, some Saudis argued that the approach to gender segregation taken in the country was 'cultural not religious'. Innovations and attempts to 'modernise' the country can then be framed in terms of being entirely Islamic (depending on your interpretation of the Qur'an), but requiring some cultural changes. The line between religion and culture is therefore of key importance to political discussion (see Badawi, this volume).

While religious belief is deeply held by most Saudis, there are also a wide variety of soft and hard approaches, which are taken to ensure adherence to religious values. These range from disapproving looks to the role of the government agency the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (*Haia*) which employs religious police (*mutaween*) to actively enforce a conservative interpretation of Islam. The cultural and political enforcing of religion is in a constant state of flux as different religious and political currents rise and fall within Saudi society. For example, following the death of King Abdullah, *Haia* and the *mutaween* appeared to be in the ascendancy (Spencer, 2015) but their power has more recently been curtailed by the Saudi cabinet (Arab News, 2016). However, it would be wrong to view such changes as part of a permanent drift within Saudi society towards liberalism or conservatism.

The Place of Women

Gender plays a key role in the organisation of Saudi society. Many of the Saudis I spoke to were keen to stress the important and distinctive role that women have in Saudi society as wives and mothers and increasingly as members of the government, workers and entrepreneurs. However, there are also key differences in the legal and cultural position of men and women within Saudi society. This is immediately apparent to the visitor from the very different, and legally enforced, ways that women and men dress (*The Economist*, 2015). Women wear the long (usually black) *abaya* to cover their clothes and the *hijab* (headscarf), which is often combined with the wearing of the *niqāb* or veil. Men wear the long white *thobe* and *keffiyeh* headdress. However, *Guidance professional four* noted that the interpretation of the rules on dress is often dynamic and varies across the country.

Interactions between women and men are carefully managed. While I was in Saudi Arabia I gave a number of presentations. On some occasions women and men

were formally separated through the use of a screen in the middle of the room, at other times they were informally separated with men at the front of the class and women at the back, in still others I spoke to mixed groups (*reflection one and two*). One of the other consultants that I spoke to had worked mainly with all-male groups while another had worked with both mixed and segregated groups (*consultants two and three*). Gender segregation is clearly dynamic and its interpretation depends on context and on the political and religious stances taken by the individuals involved. Al Rasheed (2015) argues that the prohibition on mixing between the sexes in public places (*ikhtilat*) has eroded in recent years. However, negotiating this issue remains complex and poses considerable challenges for the organisation of employment, especially for non-Saudi companies which are not used to managing gender segregation.

Women remain dramatically under-represented in the Saudi labour market (Al-Rasheed, 2015), although there is some evidence that this is changing. The emergence of a visible public class of female Saudi entrepreneurs is held up as an example of this shift in Saudi labour market (Damanhour, 2015). Career guidance within the Kingdom aims to increase female participation in the workforce, but some believe that increased participation should be enacted in a way that maintains segregated workplaces.

The ideology of ‘modesty’ and ‘virtue’ is critical to the way in which the genders interact in Saudi. These are internalised ideas about how women should act which are shared, or at least understood, by all Saudis. However, such cultural policing of gender norms through the giving and taking away of approval does not tell the whole story of Saudi gender relations. The organisation of gender relations in the Kingdom also requires considerable legal and quasi-legal policing. For example, women are prohibited from driving in a society in which cars are the only viable mode of transport and require the permission of male members of their family to work or study (Lacey, 2009). The *mutaween* also provide a quasi-legal enforcement of gender distinctions. All of these issues raise additional complexity in the provision of career guidance to women within the Kingdom.

Oil and the Economy

Until the mid-1930s the Saudi economy was under-developed with the chief source of external income coming from pilgrims to the country’s holy cities (Lacey, 2009). However, following the discovery of oil the country began to go through a process of rapid economic, urban and technological development that has continued to the present (albeit contoured by ebbs and flows in the price of oil) (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix, 2015). Oil remains as the mainstay of the Saudi economy with the country controlling 25% of the world’s proven oil reserves.

The oil industry has been a major boon to the country. Saudi’s oil-fuelled wealth is apparent in the country’s expensive cars, in its statement skyscrapers and in its ultra-consumerist malls. There is little visible poverty and much visible affluence.

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Many shops sell largely luxury brands and shopping is one of the main forms of entertainment available to Saudis (Le Renard, 2015). The Saudis I spoke to admitted an addiction to shopping (*reflection two*). One young Saudi used the phrase ‘money is easy to come by, but keeping it is hard’ to describe his experience. He and his colleagues described how they spend their time in malls buying clothes, gadgets, jewellery and household goods. Although, it is important to recognise that not everyone shares in this consumer culture and that many migrant workers find themselves at the bottom of the Saudi labour market with a need to send any spare money back to support families in their home countries (Kapiszewski, 2006). Furthermore, there is also growing concern about income inequality amongst Saudis (Roelants & Aarts, 2016).

Although oil brings affluence, the reliance on oil causes concerns at a policy level. The desire to diversify the economy beyond the oil industry remains as a major economic objective (Jones, 2015). This is enshrined in *Saudi Vision 2030* and the *National Development Plan* which promise the promotion of private sector-led investments, the privatisation of inefficient government services and diversification into non-oil sectors, such as healthcare, tourism and hospitality, entertainment, IT, global trade logistics, petrochemicals, mining and metals, alternative energies, retail, and investment and finance (HRDF, 2016). Career guidance is viewed as a key part of this strategy to rebalance the Saudi economy.

Migration and the Labour Market

Saudi Arabia has a very high proportion of migrant labour. 32% of the population are expatriates and this group accounts for 57% of the labour force and 89% of the private sector workforce (de Bel-Air, 2014). Migrant workers are drawn from a wide range of countries with workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia being the largest groups, but also large numbers drawn from regionally and culturally proximate countries such as Egypt, Syria, the Sudan and Yemen. These foreign workers are largely based in the construction and the retail and wholesale sectors and in service to private households. There is also a numerically smaller, but economically important, group of European, North American and Antipodean expatriates who are involved in running foreign companies that operate in Saudi Arabia and in providing consultancy and specialist high skills to both the public and private sectors. Expats comprise 52% of the high skilled ‘manager’ and ‘specialist’ occupational categories. This group have been important in the development of the Saudi career guidance.

The factors that have contributed to the over-representation of migrant labour in the Saudi economy are complex and include elements of labour shortage, skills shortage as well as cultural and economic disincentives for native Saudis to participate in the labour market and to take particular roles (de Bel-Air, 2014; HRDF, 2016). Many employers are unenthusiastic about employing Saudi workers. One of the guidance professionals I spoke to summarised the stereotype:

Many Saudis, especially those in government, clock in and out but spend their day not working either physically in the office, or away from it completely. (Guidance professional one)

Changing Saudis' attitudes to work and employers' attitudes to Saudi labour are important aims of the country's career guidance programme.

The current organisation of the Saudi labour market has resulted in a number of social problems, with native Saudi's often un- or under-employed and marginalised. This has led to some young people participating in anti-social behaviours (Menoret, 2014) and occasional outbreaks of protest (de Bel-Air, 2014). The growth in the size of the youth population (the 'youth bulge') has exacerbated some of these problems. Saudi policy makers are concerned that a large disaffected youth population will make the country susceptible to the twin challenges posed by popular reformist movements, typified by the Arab Spring of 2010–2012, or radical jihadism, currently typified by Daesh.

This has prompted a number of policy responses including the *Hafiz* system of employment support and the *Nitaqat* campaign for the Saudisation of the workforce. The Saudisation policy has sought to rebalance the labour market in favour of the domestic workforce through a mix of incentives for employers, campaigns amongst young Saudis and disincentives designed to make the Kingdom less appealing for foreign workers (Fakeeh, 2009).

Career guidance is also seen as an important part of the policy mix as one of the consultants I spoke to noted.

Integration of career guidance in the education system would give the country better opportunities to meet the challenges it will face in a pressure of the political movements in the neighbouring countries, it could prevent radicalisation. Second, it has the potential to integrate natives into the labour market in more diverse employment. (Consultant two)

There is some evidence to suggest that these policies are beginning to work with a steady growth of Saudis employed in the private sector (Jadwa, 2015). However, this change is starting from a low base and one of the guidance professionals that I spoke to was doubtful about how far down the economy it would be able to penetrate.

The labour force is almost dominated by foreigners. Indians, Pakistanis and Philippines are everywhere by the thousands. Saudis seem to be the owners or patrons mainly. Saudisation is a very difficult goal at least in the short and middle term. At least for low wage jobs. (Guidance professional three)

The Education System

The education system has been caught in many of the contradictions that lie at the heart of Saudi society. Education continues to be strongly dominated by religion and contoured by gender. This has led to low demand for technical education and poor

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alignment between the skills developed by the education system and those needed in the labour market (HRDF, 2016).

Sultana and Watts (2007) argue that the education system in Arab states is typically characterised by élitism and selectivity, memorisation and rote learning approaches and that they are weakly professionalised. They also highlight the fact that higher education has frequently been massified while vocational education is often neglected. These points seem to hold true in Saudi Arabia although some of my informants felt that this was beginning to change in some places.

The instructivist pedagogies within the country are of key importance to the implementation of career guidance within the education system. *Consultant two* argued that “students did not have so much opportunity for active engagement during the sessions” while *Guidance professional one* noted that “the majority of government education in school is ‘old fashioned’, rote learning, the curriculum is in set books and critical thinking is lacking”. This pedagogic approach is likely to be limiting for career guidance, which has strong traditions of making use of experiential and participatory pedagogies. However, *Consultant three* felt that there was a growing openness in the country to experiential approaches to education and that enthusiasm for using new technologies was also driving innovation in learning.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAREER GUIDANCE IN SAUDIA ARABIA

There is a very limited tradition of career guidance provision in Saudi Arabia. While there is a history of guidance and counselling within schools in the Kingdom, this has tended to be pastoral in nature and has had very limited engagement with the concept of career (Alotaibi, 2016; Saleh, 1987). A number of my informants noted that there is also a longer tradition of the provision of career support within employment but this is dependent on individual employers. The consultants who provided reflections for this chapter noted that over recent years the idea of creating a public Saudi career guidance system has been raised a few times (*Consultant one* and *two*). A series of initiatives were described as taking place in 2011–2012 although it is unclear as to how far these initiatives have underpinned the current interest in career guidance. Despite a number of attempts to introduce career guidance the Saudi Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) (2016) concede that at present:

Most of the entrants in the labour market have not received any structured guidance in the K-12 system or at the university *level* on how best to plan and manage their educational and career choices.

The development of career guidance in Saudi Arabia has been driven by the Ministry of Labour. There are also a number of career guidance projects funded by the Ministry of Education and the General Directorate of Youth Organization but this work is not well integrated with the Ministry of Labour’s attempt to build a national system (*Reflection two* and *Consultant two*). The development of departmental silos around career guidance policy has been observed worldwide and is not particular to

Saudi Arabia (McCarthy & Hooley, 2015). Nonetheless, coordinating between all of the different aspects of the government with an interest in career guidance poses a major challenge.

The vision of the Ministry of Labour is to develop a lifelong career guidance system which will cover primary, secondary and tertiary education, job-seekers and services and those in employment. The initial elements of this system were developed in 2013–2014 (Watts, 2014b) and were conceived as (1) *Fast Track* programmes that began to deliver career guidance services straight away; (2) *Strategic Instrument Development* which created key frameworks that could underpin the system; and (3) a *Strategy Track* which invested in the long-term thinking and underpinning development. International organisations and consultants were key to the delivery of all three of these elements of this first phase of developing the career guidance system in Saudi Arabia.

Consultant three suggested that following the implementation of the fast track “there was a surprising (to me) amount of career work already being done in the Kingdom, generally on contracts with foreign-based organisations” and noted that many postsecondary institutions now had careers services in place. A point which was echoed by *Guidance professional four* who described the development of the careers service in the King Abdullah University of Science & Technology (KAUST). *Consultant three* and *four* both agreed that there had been less progress within the Saudi school system.

As the project has moved from strategy to implementation responsibility has shifted from the Ministry of Labour to the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF). At the time of writing the HRDF (2015a) is procuring a new round of career guidance services from international and domestic bodies. As part of this the organisation has set out the rationale for career guidance within the Kingdom. Key features of this case include the fact that the Saudi workforce is growing as more young people reach working age (‘the youth bulge’), that a third of young people are unemployed and almost half of unemployed people hold a university degree. Furthermore, the situation for women is even worse, with only a fifth in employment. From the point of view of HRDF it is clear that the Saudi education and employment system is not working well and that career guidance has been identified as part of the possible solution.

HRDF’s (2015a) rationale for career guidance goes on to make a number of more specific points about the country’s education and employment system which particularly focus on the role of career decision making and its current poor alignment with demand. Key points include the under-representation of Saudis in the private sector, the low level of interest in vocational education, the frequent choice of degrees with little labour market currency and the poor progression of unemployment benefit (*hafiz*) registrants into work. This leads to the establishment of a series of strategic goals which career guidance in the Kingdom is designed to achieve.

- Empower Saudis to equally consider all sectors of the job market (not just the public sector)

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- Instil the value of a productive, lifelong career
- Encourage the principle that all jobs are valued
- Engender realistic expectations about entry-level jobs
- Enable Saudis to plan their careers according to personal aspirations and market need

These aims show that the introduction of career guidance is clearly conceived as part of *Saudi Vision 2030* and the *National Development Plan* as well as part of the campaign for the Saudisation of the workforce. Career guidance is ambitiously positioned within the Kingdom as a force that can reshape the way that Saudis' identities interact with the education system and labour market and which can contribute to the wholesale restructuring of the Saudi economy. *Consultant four* summed this up as follows.

I think that career guidance is very important to KSA as it is breaking with the old tradition/preference of public sector employment. Youth should be made aware where the future market opportunities are, what their strengths and interests are and make on that basis an informed decision on which educational pathway to follow. Career education could also change the perception/stigma around vocational education.

Through HRDF the government is seeking to develop a career guidance system that includes careers centres, the provision of career information, online resources, events and the development of a career management and employability skills framework for individuals and standards and training capable of supporting the development of a domestic career guidance profession. The development of policies, standards and guidelines through the *strategic instrument development* has been an important focus for the emergent system and has been designed to provide an underpinning quality approach for career guidance in the country (HRDF, 2015b). The system continues to be imagined as a universal lifelong career development system although much of the focus is on young people and on those who are currently excluded from the labour market.

So far the Saudi government have contracted out a lot of the development of career guidance system to international experts and drawing on international expertise remains at the heart of the current round of procurement (HRDF, 2016). The approach has largely been to identify international best practice and then to seek to contextualise it through engagement with Saudi society (HRDF, 2015b). Watts (2014b) notes that the Saudi approach has been strongly influenced by international reviews of career guidance (see also Watts, 2014a) and it is also possible to detect strong influences from Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA. These influences reflect the range of international consultants who have been working within the Kingdom. The lack of pre-existing careers policy or practice in Saudi Arabia has meant that it has often been difficult to contextualise this international practice and that consequently many of the frameworks and products that have been developed remain strongly Western with limited Saudi elements.

REFLECTIONS

The development of the Saudi career guidance system therefore represents an important and serious attempt to implement career guidance in a context that is different to any of the contexts within which career guidance was born and has flourished. This raises a series of challenges and issues which are discussed below.

Challenges of Culture

In their work on career guidance in the Middle East and North Africa, Sultana and Watts (2008) highlight a range of cultural features that are likely to be important to the development of guidance systems. These include the importance of both immediate and extended families, rigid social distinctions between genders, the existence of networks of patronage and clientalism (often linked to extended family structures), hierarchical assumptions about the exercise of power and a limited autonomy which relates to all of the factors cited as well as to a cultural fatalism. Underpinning many of these features is the fact that MENA countries are what Hall (1976) calls 'high context' cultures in which familial, social and cultural expectations have a greater influence on individual decision making than they do in the West. As *Guidance practitioner one* said, within Saudi Arabia "there is an underlying concern about what the neighbours will say" and this impacts on individuals' thinking about their career.

Most of the cultural features identified by Sultana and Watts in the MENA countries are apparent in Saudi culture and are often exacerbated by the autocratic nature of the Saudi state, the close alignment of religious power with state power and the nature of the Saudi labour market and education system (Long, 2006). All of these issues pose considerable challenges for the implementation of career guidance due to its attachment to individual autonomy and social and economic flexibility. Ironically it is a desire to overcome many of these challenges that makes career guidance appealing to Saudi policy makers. However, the limited theoretical and practical resources that exist within the Kingdom make it more difficult to resolve these issues. This forces the country to rely on international consultants, which in some ways exacerbates the problem. *Consultant two* summarises this point noting:

The challenge relates how the local cultural, economic and religious context is taken into account in developing the national system in co-operation with Western consultants. The methods and approaches are relevant to some extent, but the local culture sets limitations to individual choices at the moment.

Resolving, or at least successfully managing this double bind is critical for the future of career guidance within the Kingdom. Its advocates hope that it can provide a lubricant for change without destabilising Saudi society. Career guidance can help women to integrate into the labour market, but this needs to be done in a way that does not cause serious concerns for the more conservative members of Saudi society nor

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undermine the ideologies of modesty and virtue. Saudi youth need to be encouraged to pursue vocational education and develop skills, but this needs to be done in a way that does not lead towards secularisation. The concept of career needs to be disseminated in a way that encourages entrepreneurship, autonomy and aspiration, whilst maintaining social cohesion and attachment to existing social institutions.

Challenges of Theory

A consideration of the cultural issues raises problems that Saudi career guidance is only at the beginning of trying to resolve. Many Saudis told me that they believed that it was possible to create a uniquely Saudi version of career guidance. The imagined field would be both forward looking and rooted in Islamic epistemology. This point echoes a wider debate about the future of Saudi society, which is summed up by the lawyer and constitutional campaigner Ahmad Al-Tuwayjri.

People talk as if there are only two ways for us in the Kingdom, to imitate the West slavishly or to preserve everything and resist any change. But there is a third way, the way of *ijtihad* – to find out and follow the truth. (Ahmad Al-Tuwayjri quoted in Lacey, 2009, p. 330)

Sultana and Watts (2007) discuss the debate within in Arab societies, and in Islam more generally, regarding the relationship that there should be with Western theory. The *Islamisation* of knowledge refers to an attempt to harmonise Western knowledge with Islamic ontology and epistemology. At present it is clear that career guidance in Saudi Arabia is strongly reliant on Western epistemologies although there is a considerable amount of thinking going on within the country about how career guidance should develop for the Saudi context. This thinking is also beginning to underpin the training that is being delivered within the country. *Guidance professional four* reported attending a “course on career development designed and delivered by leading scholars from the West who very effectively sought to deliver a bespoke course”.

So far the development of career guidance within the Kingdom has focused on the transplanting of services and frameworks from Western contexts to provide a basis for the development of the activity. Many of the emerging institutions of Saudi career guidance have been through a process of borrowing, iterating and experimenting. Consultants have been running focus groups, conducting needs analyses and developing pilot projects. However, as the field develops there will be a need to continue to re-theorise the activity and institutions of Saudi career guidance and this may mean that some of the central assumptions about what career guidance is are ultimately challenged. Following my first visit to Saudi Arabia (*Reflection one*) I reflected that “discussions of ethical practice surfaced this issue for example highlighting the challenges associated with implementing confidentiality within a context where families expect to have a strong influence on their children’s futures.” Basic tenets of Western career guidance such as the presumption of client confidentiality become open to challenge in this new context.

Consultant two also noted that “the local culture and religion limits the use of traditional career theories”. But at present we have only limited clues as to what a Saudi version of career theory might look like. *Guidance practitioner two* described exploring the Western career theory canon to find approaches that might work within the high context culture of Saudi Arabia and noted that Laws’ (1981) community interaction theory and Krumboltz’s (1994) social learning theory have been useful as they provide a theoretical basis for thinking about how individuals pursue their careers within social and community contexts. *Consultant three* also highlighted Leong and Lee’s (2006) cultural accommodation model as being useful for thinking through how Western notions like career guidance can be developed and adapted to take account of new cultural contexts and Hansen’s (1996) integrative life planning approach which addresses values, community and spirituality as part of an approach to career development. However, whilst such theories offer valuable resources there is a need to develop and repurpose them for the Saudi context and to introduce new elements such as a stronger connection with Islamic epistemologies. However, *Guidance professional four* noted that “there appears to be no cadre of academics and scholars in Saudi Arabia that specialise in the careers guidance discipline” and recognised that this provides an obstacle to the development of domestic career theory.

Some clues about what a more contextualised Saudi career theory would look like are offered by Hani Ibrahim Khoja’s (2016) book *A Global Nomad in Search of True Happiness*. This book is not an explicit attempt to build career theory. Rather it is a personal narrative that recounts the authors’ career journey and attempts to draw out some career lessons for other Saudis. However, a reading of the book offers some insights about how the concept of career is understood and enacted within Saudi culture. Khoja’s book asks readers to consider five key questions.

1. Who are you?
2. What are you supremely good at?
3. Who do you want to help and how?
4. What needs to be done to turn your ideas into reality?
5. What’s stopping you from jumping?

Questions 1, 2, 4 and 5 would all fit into a standard Western self-help book. Although the way that they are expounded is often different. Khoja strongly emphasises the role of family, community and nation as key enablers and motivators. He is also very clear on the spiritual dimension of work. Building a career is a duty that all Muslims should embrace.

God has designated each and everyone of us as His Khalifa on earth – so it would make little sense if He didn’t empower us with unique skills to play this important role... the key is discovering what those skills are. We know that this requires self-reflection, honesty with oneself, and confidence that God has empowered each and every one of us with some unique skill which is stronger than anyone else around us. (p. 170)

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Question 3 is interesting as it locates philanthropy as a core aim of career development and asks people to consider carefully what they are achieving success for and how they plan to contribute to their communities.

Khoja is neither an imam nor a spokesman for the emerging career development field in Saudi. Consequently, we should be careful about assuming that his text represents wider thinking in Saudi Arabia. However, Khoja's book is interesting partially because of the way that it fuses influences from Western career development with more distinctively Saudi perspectives on the place of career within family and community, the relationship between the individuals' career and their faith and the equal place that career success and philanthropy should have in the aims of the individual.

Challenges for Policy

The implementation of career guidance within Saudi Arabia has been a hugely ambitious undertaking. The country has moved from almost no career guidance provision, through the design of an ambitious lifelong guidance system into an implementation phase. However, a number of key questions remain.

Guidance professional four raised a number of the key issues that he perceives are hampering the realisation of the vision of a world-class career guidance system. In particular he notes the lack of a "clear communications strategy for the implementation of the new Saudi Arabia National Standards in Career Education and Development", the lack of "clear communication channels between government and key stakeholders" and finally the fact that "there appears to be no governing body to implement, govern and maintain the National Standards." These points raise issues about the level of policy coherence, co-ordination and implementation required to ensure that a lifelong guidance system emerges rather than a series of projects. There is also a need to build Saudi capacity to develop and implement of careers policy and to reduce the reliance on international consultants. Such capacity building has been the focus of a number of the tenders and projects commissioned by the HRDF and it will be important to continue this focus as the system develops.

At times the enthusiasm for career guidance within the Kingdom seems out of step with both the current state of development of the activity and what it is realistic for an educational activity like career guidance to actually achieve. On returning from my second trip to Saudi Arabia I reflected as follows.

Career guidance/career development is seen as an exciting new area of activity in Saudi. I was told that it had featured in the Saudi newspapers numerous times. At times I was worried that the idea of career guidance was being advanced as a kind of cure-all snake oil. Often ill-defined, Saudis seemed willing to throw career guidance at any problem they perceive within the education and employment system. However, in general they under-estimate the level of training required for careers professionals and the complexity of developing a system to deliver this activity. (Reflection two)

However, despite these misgivings, the enthusiasm for career guidance is not without its merits. The Saudi government are committed to creating a world-class career guidance system and are currently investing in the area to a substantial degree.

Challenges for Practice

The already identified issues in relation to culture, theory and policy all come together in practice. At present, while there is a considerable amount of career guidance being practiced in the Kingdom, there is no clear and consistent approach to practice and nor, at present is there a national community of practice through which such an approach could emerge.

The current procurement round which is being conducted by HRDF promises to develop professional capacity and to provide an information and resource base on which Saudi career guidance can build. However, at present practice continues to be driven from above. *Guidance professional three* notes that there are not “enough, good, solid, and qualified practitioners” and that there is a need to ‘establish counsellor education programmes at a master’s level.’ A point that is echoed by *Guidance professional four*, who notes.

There appears to be no critical number of careers practitioners to create an informal ‘community of practice’ that would represent the voice of the profession at these initial stages to support the implementation of the new National Standards. There appears to be no informal or formal network of careers practitioners to foster sharing of knowledge, ideas and best practices.

Consultant three was more optimistic and had observed the emergence of a domestic community of practice. The HRDF is actively attempting to address this issue, but there is a considerable distance still to travel. The emergence of a domestic profession is only likely to happen relatively slowly. How this profession develops will depend in part on the balance that is struck between viewing it as part of an international community of practice, for example the HRDF are keen to align Saudi professional qualifications with international standards, and viewing it as a Saudi innovation within which domestic approaches to both theory and practice can be nurtured which are potentially at variance with international norms.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of a career guidance system in Saudi Arabia raises interesting questions for both those who seek to lend and borrow career guidance policies. As Sultana (2008) has noted the process of lending and borrowing is political, with both sides often seeking to advance their own agendas, and complex, which means that both sides can be surprised by what emerges.

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The international career guidance community have been keen to lend their expertise to Saudi Arabia and to try and ensure that this policy experiment is a success. They have volunteered and sold their services, expertise and frameworks, mentored policy makers, trained professionals and celebrated the admission of Saudi Arabia to the 'career guidance club'. In addition to the laudable local policy goals which it serves, the development of a 'new' career guidance system in an exotic, but powerful, nation also provides valuable ammunition for the field's advocates internationally.

Meanwhile the Saudi Ministry of Labor has sought to use career guidance to deliver a range of impacts that Saudi Arabia desperately needs. It is hoped that career guidance can act on Saudis' work ethic, on the alignment of education and employment and on the efficiency of the economy. Career guidance is conceived as an agent of social change.

The willingness to borrow from elsewhere in the world has allowed the Saudis to make rapid progress, but such rapid progress is in tension with the development of an organic profession and theoretical base. Such tensions are inevitable in any country which is seeking to drive change in policy and practice very quickly, but are even more challenging in a culture such as Saudi Arabia where there is a need to rethink many of the assumptions which underpin career guidance. HRDF, the international consultants working in the country and the growing domestic career guidance field are aware of these challenges, but successfully navigating them will require skill and attention over the long term.

A lot is being asked for from career guidance. Saudi Arabia is trying to drive through a series of very ambitious and at times contradictory changes. There are reasons to believe that career guidance might be able to support some of these changes, but also reasons to be sceptical as to how far the current economic, cultural and political environment within Saudi Arabia will actually support the development of a functioning career guidance system. If it is to be successful there will be a need to engage with social, cultural and political interests that are bound up with issues of gender, family, class, religion, wealth and personal autonomy which are likely to be very hard to shift.

The jury must remain out on the Saudi career guidance experiment. However, the world will be watching with interest as the system continues to develop. If it is successful, we may see dramatic shifts in both the Saudi Arabian labour market and in the international career guidance field itself.

NOTE

- ¹ I passed a draft of this chapter to all of my informants and to one other consultant with experience of working on career guidance in Saudi Arabia. A number of people provided detailed feedback which I have taken into account as I have revised the chapter. I am grateful to all of these informants for their knowledge of Saudi Arabia and thoughtful contributions to this chapter.

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